

The Paschal Gospel: Reading John in Early and Eastern Christianity

Fr John Behr

Christian theology, as we know it, is inconceivable without the Gospel of John and especially its Prologue. The Word in the beginning, with God and as God, and the becoming flesh of this Word, stated here in simple and beautiful prose, are the key points that theology would grapple with in subsequent centuries, in controversies that resulted in imperially convoked world-wide councils which defined what we have come to think of as the chief articles of the Christian faith: Trinity and Incarnation. That the Prologue speaks of the becoming flesh of the Word is no doubt the reason why it has come to be the reading for the Nativity of Christ for most of Western Christianity. In the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, however, the Prologue is read on Easter night, at Pascha, and the reading of John continues throughout the Paschal season: it is the Paschal Gospel. Why is this so? What is the historical background for this, and does this indicate that perhaps we should be hearing this Gospel in a different key?¹

Within a century or so of its composition, the Gospel of John was described as “the spiritual Gospel” and in the following centuries its author was referred to simply as “the theologian.” And yet for most of the last century, it has been assumed that the Gospel of John is an outlier compared to the Synoptic Gospels: its striking emphasis on the divinity of Christ and his pre-existence (which led Käsemann to decried it as little more than “naïve Docetism”²) and the claim that it is first commented on by Gnostic writers such as Ptolemy and Heracleon—all this led to the belief that it originated in Gnostic (or other outlying) circles, and that it was Irenaeus of Lyons who first appropriated the Gospel for Catholic Christianity.

This conviction was held by a large part of twentieth-century scholarship. It has, however, been debunked over the last couple of decades. If the publication of Martin Hengel’s book *The Johannine Question* delivered, in Charles Hill’s words, a “spanking” to the guild of Johannine scholars, it was only received as a light lashing for they continued their work “almost unaffected”; Hill’s own exhaustive and meticulous study, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, on the other hand, has surely administered the final flogging of the horses that by any academic standard should have been dead at the starting post, that is, the twin theories of “orthodox Johannophobia” and “gnostic Johannophilia.”³ The idea that the Gospel according to John originated in and was first used by heterodox circles and was initially viewed with suspicion by the orthodox Church, which remained silent about it until Irenaeus appropriated it for use by the Great Church, is not only debunked by Hill, but turned on its head: “there is no ‘silence’ which needs to be accounted for. On the contrary, instead of a silence one might better speak of a din, a relative tumult, an increasing uproar.”⁴ If there was a “Johannophobia” it was in point of fact amongst the “Gnostics,” whose relationship to this Gospel was “critical or adversarial,” before the Valentians attempted to appropriate the Gospel by a novel interpretation of its

¹ This lecture is based on work done for my forthcoming book, *John the Theologian and his Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology*; more information and details will be available therein.

² Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus According to John 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968 [German 1966]), 26

³ Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58, referring to Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London, 1989), *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch*, WUNT 67 (Tübingen, 1993).

⁴ Hill *Johannine Corpus*, 444.

Prologue; the Gospel's offence, to them, was its emphasis on the incarnation of the Word of God and its affirmation of the privileged status of the eyewitnesses, the very points which were already central to the letters of John.⁵ Irenaeus did not pull off "the literary *coup* of the century,"⁶ but continued the tradition witnessing to what had been known "from the beginning" (1 Jn 1:1). When we turn again to what had been known "from the beginning," two facts emerge about the John who wrote the Gospel, both of which have significance for how we then understand his Gospel.

I: John the Elder, the Disciple of the Lord

Once one turns from the attempt to discern the identity of the author of the Gospel of John and his context from an internal analysis of the Gospel, as much previous scholarship attempted by means of hypothetical theories of redaction and the supposed community that lay behind the Gospel, to the historical witness to the Gospel, which during the course of the second century is remarkably consistent, there are two key points that emerge: first, that the John who wrote the Gospel was not the apostle, the son of Zebedee, but an elder known as "the disciple of the Lord," and second, that the practice of celebrating Pascha derives from him, so much so that he is regarded as being the high priest.

That there were two Johns is indicated by the first external evidence we have, from Papias of Hierapolis. Probably in the first decade of the second century Papias began writing his works preserving information he had been able to gather in the previous decades, the very time when the Gospel of John was being written. The difficulty, of course, is that Papias' writings are now lost, and only known through quotations made by later authors, principally Eusebius, who quoted from them selectively for his own purposes. According to Eusebius, Papias asserted that:

If anyone chanced to come by, who had been in attendance on the elders, I inquired about the words of the elders—[that is,] what [according to the elders] Andrew or Peter said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the disciples of the Lord, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, disciples of the Lord, are saying. (*h.e.* 3.39.4)

The John mentioned in the list along with James clearly refers to the son of Zebedee, known to us from the Synoptic Gospels, but only mentioned once, and then not by name, in the Gospel of John (21:2). Moreover, at the time when Papias was collecting his material (in the last decades of the first century) all these figures are deceased. Eusebius assumes that it was this John who wrote the Gospel (*h.e.* 3.39.5). But alongside this John, Papias mentions another John, together with Aristion, both of whom are distinctively known as "disciples of the Lord" and are very much still alive. If one is reluctant, Eusebius continues, as he clearly is, to ascribe the Apocalypse to John the son of Zebedee, then it must have been John the Elder that wrote it. That there were indeed two Johns in Ephesus, moreover, is born out by there being, even in Eusebius' day, two tombs in the city bearing the name John (*h.e.* 5–6). However, rather than relating any more information that Papias had collected about the Gospel of John and its author, and perhaps even more importantly regarding the Apocalypse, Eusebius turns instead to berating Papias for having passed on mythological nonsense and strange teachings regarding the eschaton, due to his "very limited understanding" (*h.e.* 3.39.11–13).

If Papias did indeed know of the Gospel of John, did he have anything more to say about it which Eusebius is not prepared to report in this passage? This is the heart of the controversy. Many have argued that not only did Papias know this Gospel, but that he attributed its authorship, not to the

⁵ Ibid. 466–7. For the "Gnostic" reading see *ibid.*, 205–93.

⁶ Ibid. 78.

apostle John, the son of Zebedee, but to John the Elder.⁷ In the nineteenth century, Lightfoot noted, as have many others since, that there is a strong resemblance between the order of the names given in the passage we looked at—Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew—and the order in which the disciples of Christ appear in the Gospel of John (1:40–3 and 21:2), which is very different to any list of disciples or apostles given in the Synoptics: that Andrew should appear before Peter in particular cannot be explained in any other way than by positing the influence of the Gospel of John.⁸ Building on this, and a compelling reading of the Gospel of John itself, Richard Bauckham has recently and persuasively argued that the Gospel was written by the Beloved Disciple, an eyewitness of the events of the life of Christ, but an eyewitness who was not one of the twelve named in the Synoptic Gospels;⁹ he is introduced anonymously, with Andrew and before Peter, at the beginning of the Gospel (1:35–42); he is identified as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” as the narrative arrives at the Passion (13:23); he is known to the high priest of the temple (and it is only by him that Peter gains admittance, 18:15–17); he is the only disciple to remain at the foot of the cross, to provide witness to the blood and water coming from side of Christ (19:35); he is the first disciple, again before Peter, to arrive at the empty tomb, and although Peter enters first, it is he who “believed” (20:4); and it is he, not Peter, who recognizes the risen Lord (21:7); and finally, while Peter is to lay down his life in service of others, John’s mission is to bear witness (21:15–25). For those who hold that the Gospel of John, because of its high literary and interpretative nature compared with the Synoptics, could not have been written by an actual eyewitness of Christ, Bauckham simply replies: “in fact the high degree of interpretation is appropriate precisely because this is the only one of the canonical Gospels that claims eyewitness authorship,”¹⁰ or, to be more precise, the authority of the only evangelist who witnessed the Passion.

We can readily understand why, if Papias had indeed related information to the effect that the Gospel of John was not written by the son of Zebedee, but by another figure known as “the Elder,” who had also written the Apocalypse, Eusebius would want to sow confusion by belittling Papias’ intellectual ability. Eusebius is particularly concerned to cast aspersions upon the Apocalypse, citing evidence from Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century which claims that it was not written by the same person who wrote the Gospel (*h.e.* 7.24–5.), even though their common authorship was consistently affirmed in the second century, especially by those whom Lightfoot calls “the school of John” (in particular Irenaeus);¹¹ we will return to this point later.

Charles Hill has mounted a valiant defence against this supposed obfuscation, arguing that the reason why Eusebius does not record what Papias says about the Gospel of John is that he had already done this several chapters earlier (*h.e.* 3.24). Hill’s argument was contested by Bauckham, which was in turn responded to by Hill himself.¹² It is not necessary for our purposes to enter into the details of that debate. Regarding the idea that Papias did indeed indicate that it

⁷ Cf. C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922), 133–49; Hengel, *The Johannine Question*.

⁸ Cf. J.B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled Supernatural Religion* (London: McMillan, 1889), 193; Hengel, *Question*, 17–21; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 417–20; Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 386.

⁹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, esp. 114–54 (chap. 6, “Eyewitnesses ‘from the beginning’”), 358–83 (chap. 14, “The Gospel of John as Eyewitness Testimony”) and 384–411 (chap. 15, “The Witness of the Beloved Disciple”).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 411.

¹¹ Lightfoot, *Essays*, 217–50.

¹² Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 433–7; Hill, “The ‘Orthodox Gospel’: The Reception of John in the Great Church Prior to Irenaeus,” in Tuomas Rasimus, ed., *The Legacy of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 233–300, at 288–94.

was the Elder, not the Apostle, who wrote the Gospel, and that Eusebius deliberately obfuscated the point, Hill argues:

... the deception in this case cannot be confined to Eusebius. Other ‘interested’ people clearly *had* read Papias’ books, including Irenaeus and a number of other second- and third-century writers, yet neither they nor anyone else ever reports the opinion that the Gospel according to John had been written by John the Elder.¹³

But this is, in fact, just what Irenaeus does say, though in slightly different words. Irenaeus has his own distinctive and consistent vocabulary for referring to the author of the Gospel of John. There are sixty-six occasions when Irenaeus mentions John, the author of the Johannine material, sixty-one times by name and five other times where he is unambiguously referring to this John. Of these sixty-six instances, seventeen describe him as “John the disciple of the Lord,” and four further times he uses “the disciple of the Lord” or “his disciple” in contexts that make clear that he is referring to John, and one further time he speaks of “Christ, the teacher of John.” No other figure is called by Irenaeus, simply, “the disciple of the Lord.” As such the phrase “the disciple of the Lord” does not classify the John amongst other disciples, but rather distinguishes him as *the* disciple, just as Paul is unambiguously known as “the apostle.” In contrast to Irenaeus’ repeated references to John, “the disciple of the Lord,” there are only five instances where he refers specifically to the John who is a son of Zebedee, and in each case it is not with reference to the Johannine material or its author, but to the figure of John who appears in the Synoptics and Acts, and, moreover, in none of these cases does Irenaeus use his habitual description for the author of the Johannine corpus, “the disciple of the Lord.” As Bauckham concludes, based on these and other considerations: “For the members of the church of Ephesus and of churches in the province of Asia generally, *the* disciple of the Lord was their own John, the one who reclined on the Lord’s breast and wrote his Gospel in Ephesus. ... nothing that Irenaeus says either about John ‘the disciple of the Lord’ or about John the son of Zebedee even suggests that they might be the same person.”¹⁴

II The High-Priest of the Paschal Mystery

One other fascinating piece of information about the John who wrote the Gospel comes to us from the letter of Polycrates of Ephesus, written in the midst of the Paschal controversy at the end of the second century. Our primary source for this is again Eusebius, and once again he presents us with a heavily redacted account.¹⁵ According to Eusebius, the controversy was between the Church of Rome, lead by Victor (as a fourth century Pope of Rome) taking issue with the churches of Asia Minor for their celebration of Pascha on the 14 Nisan, whatever day of the week it was (the Quartodecimans, or the “fourteeners”). The evidence he quotes, however, as is now almost universally agreed, indicates that it was an intra-Roman controversy, in which communities of Christians from Asia Minor celebrated the Paschal feast on the 14 Nisan, whereas the Roman Christian communities had *no* annual celebration of Pascha, but only kept the weekly Lord’s Day. In recounting this, Eusebius preserves a passage from a letter of Irenaeus to Victor reminding him that when Polycarp had visited Rome several decades earlier, he and Victor’s predecessor, Anicetus, agreed to disagree:

neither was Anicetus able to persuade Polycarp not to observe it, inasmuch as he had always done so in company with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated; nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it, for he said that he ought to keep the custom of those who were presbyters before him. And under

¹³ Charles Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 460, 463.

¹⁵ Cf. W. L. Petersen, “Eusebius and the Paschal Controversy,” in Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata eds., *Eusebius, Christianity and Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 311–25.

these circumstances they communed with each other, and in the church Anicetus yielded the celebration of the Eucharist to Polycarp, obviously out of respect, and they parted from each other in peace, for the peace of the whole church was kept both by those who observed and by those who did not. (*h.e.* 5.24.16–17)

So also now, Irenaeus concludes, peace is attainable, for, as he puts it: “the disagreement in the fast confirms our unity in the faith” (*h.e.* 5.24.13). The eventual resolution, of course, would be that the Paschal feast was celebrated on the Sunday following the 14 Nisan, and this, in turn, gave a heightened “paschal” dimension to each Sunday.

In the midst of reporting this controversy, Eusebius also preserves a letter from Polycrates of Ephesus, another supporter of the Quartodeciman practice. In this letter, Polycrates asserts that this Paschal feast was celebrated in this way by all his kinsmen (and seven of whom, no less, were bishops): “These all observed the fourteenth day for Pascha according to the Gospel, in no way deviating from it, but following the rule of faith” (*h.e.* 5.24.6). Moreover, this practice, according to Polycrates, goes back to the beginning, with Philip and “John, who lay on the Lord’s breast and rests at Ephesus, who was a priest wearing the petal, both a witness and a teacher” (*h.e.* 5.24.2–3).

That John “was a priest wearing the petal,” the *petalon*, is, to put it mildly, perplexing! According to Josephus (*Ant.* 3.172–8), in the fullest description we have of the headdress worn by the high priest in the Jerusalem Temple, this headdress was elaborate and ornate, designed to inspire awe: in addition to the linen headdress worn by other priests, the high priest wore another one on top, embroidered in blue and encircled by a gold crown with three rows, out of which arose a golden embellishment called a *calyx* resembling a crown of petals, which was then itself covered by a golden plate upon which was inscribed the name of God in sacred characters, that is, the tetragrammaton. According to the *Letter of Aristeas* (96–9), it “was an occasion of great amazement to us when we saw Eleazar engaged on his ministry and all the glorious vestments ... [a description which culminates with the *petalon*]. Their appearance makes one awe-struck and dumbfounded: a man would think that he had come out of this world into another one.” So, when Polycrates says that John wore the *petalon*, as Bauckham puts it, “his words state, as precisely and unambiguously as it was possible to do, that John officiated as high priest in the Jerusalem Temple.”¹⁶ It is not simply that he was one of the chief priests (ἀρχιερεῖς), as that term is used in the New Testament and by Josephus, for, as Bauckham points out, “there is no Greek term for ‘high priest’ that unambiguously distinguishes the chief priest from the chief priests... But ‘a priest wearing the *petalon*’ is unambiguous.”¹⁷

Various ways of interpreting this claim have been proposed. Some have taken it quite loosely or metaphorically, as no more than an extension of the interest in Christ’s high priesthood, evidenced in Hebrews and the Apocalypse, to others, such as the description of Christians as “a royal priesthood” in the First Epistle of Peter (2:9) or the claim of the *Didache* that the prophets “are your high priests” (13.3, ἀρχιερεῖς). But this does not, however, do justice to Polycrates’ very specific assertion. Most recently, Bauckham has argued that Polycrates’ words should be understood neither metaphorically nor historically but exegetically. Just as Polycrates had conflated the Philip of the twelve with Philip the Evangelist mentioned in Acts, so too Polycrates has identified the John who wrote the Gospel with the John mentioned in Acts 4:6. Bauckham gives various other examples of such conflation in the early centuries: for instance, Judas Paul’s host in Damascus (Acts 9:11) with Judas the Lord’s brother (Mark 6:3) in the *Acts of Paul*; Hermas the prophet who wrote the *Shepherd* with the one mentioned in Rom 16:14 (Origen,

¹⁶ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* 446–7.

¹⁷ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 447.

Com. Rom. 10.31). Such identification, according to Bauckham is “an *exegetical procedure*.”¹⁸ Yet, this still does not explain why Polycrates goes the extra step: he does not simply say that John was “of the high-priestly family,” which would be all that could be derived from Acts 4:6, but that he wore the *petalon*, which is, as Bauckham rightly pointed out, an unambiguous assertion that John was *the* high priest.

While Bauckham calls his interpretation “exegetical,” it is clear that he is in fact working in a historical key, looking for historical information about the author of the Gospel of John. There is another possible approach, equally exegetical but taking its lead from the Gospel of John itself rather than Acts 6:4, and which could properly be called a theological interpretation. The Gospel of John begins its narrative with the Baptist identifying Jesus specifically as “the lamb of God” (1:29), and the high point of its narrative, if not its conclusion (“it is finished,” 19:30), is the crucifixion of Jesus at the moment that the lambs are slain, or rather when the Lamb is slain, interpreting this act by the scriptural injunction that not a bone of it/his shall be broken (19:36; Exod. 12:46). Moreover, when Christ invites the Jews to “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” he spoke, the Evangelist explains, “of the temple of his body” (2:19–21). It is, finally, of course, only in the Gospel of John that one of the disciples remains at the foot of the cross, along with “the mother,” and that is “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (19:26), who, as the uniquely privileged eyewitness is able not only to bear witness, but a true witness (19:35). With this background, it is easy to understand how for Polycrates John is *the* high priest ministering at the Paschal mystery. The temple in question is not the stone edifice in Jerusalem, but Christ himself, just as the Lamb of God slain in the mystery is also Christ himself. Many different images are brought together by John, who in this way is now the high priest of the Christian mystery, the one wearing the *petalon*, the high priest with whom originated the practice of celebrating Pascha.

III Apocalyptic Gospel or Paschal Gospel?

We noted how the *Letter of Aristeas* spoke of the awe that the *petalon* inspired: “a man would think that he had come out of this world into another one.” This is, indeed, the effect that is produced in the reader when turning from the Synoptics to the Gospel of John: everything is not as it seems, everything seems turned upside down, a new world opens up before us. It is in this sense that John Ashton, in his landmark book, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, suggested that the Gospel of John should be understood as “an apocalypse—in reverse, upside down, inside out.”¹⁹ Apocalyptic thinking has, perhaps, never been so fashionable. But to understand why we have to return to two articles written by Ernst Käsemann some fifty years ago, in which he asserted that “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.”²⁰ By “apocalyptic,” Käsemann specifically meant the enthusiasm engendered by the possession of the Spirit as a pledge of the imminent Parousia, “nourished theologically from the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic,” and the sense of a corresponding ambassadorial authority for its mission thus kindled.²¹ Unlike Albert Schweitzer and his followers, “who got in their own way by trying to turn the whole question into a problem of research into the life of the historical Jesus and to explain the very early history of dogma in terms of the delay of the Parousia”—landing up in a dead end on both counts—Käsemann suggests that we should take seriously “post-Easter

¹⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 451, italics original.

¹⁹ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)329.

²⁰ Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” first published in *ZKT* 57 (1960), 162–85; translated in *ibid.* *New Testament Questions for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1969), 82–107, quotation on p.100. See also *ibid.* “On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic,” first published in *ZKT* 59 (1962), 257–84; translated in *New Testament Questions*, 108–137.

²¹ Käsemann, “Beginnings,” 92; “Apocalyptic,” 109. n.1.

apocalyptic” as being “a new theological start,” the first chapter, the beginning of dogmatics itself, not the concluding one as has since become the traditional dogmatic approach.²² “The heart of primitive Christian apocalyptic, according to Revelation and the Synoptists alike, is the accession to the throne of heaven by God and by his Christ as the eschatological Son of Man.”²³ Käsemann concludes his essay by tracing how various hopes were dashed, such as those of the “Petrine party,” who, in Matt. 16:18–19, appropriate to their leader what is promised to the whole community in Matt. 18:18, thereby making themselves a sect, thinking they could defy the gates of hell, but “unable to resist the sands of time which buried them.” Käsemann asks if this episode is an “archetype of what is always happening in the history of the Church,” and “has there ever been a theological system which has not collapsed? Have we been promised that we should know ourselves to be in possession of a *theologia perennis*?” Clearly not, is the answer his rhetorical question demands. Rather it is “only certain theological themes in the proclamation [that] are carried on from one generation to the next and thus preserve the continuity of the history of theology.” And chief among these themes is “the hope of the manifestation of the Son of God on his way to enthronement; and we have to ask ourselves whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this theme, which sprang from the Easter experience and determined the Easter faith.”²⁴

Käsemann’s thesis is provocative and generated much debate in the following decades. But it is also fairly limited, primarily because he develops his reflections almost exclusively out of the Synoptic Gospels and Revelation. This is because he has already determined what is to count as “apocalyptic,” that is, “the expectation of an imminent Parousia.”²⁵ However, his central claims—that “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology,” and that we are not given a system as a *theologia perennis*, but only “the hope of the manifestation of the Son of God on his way to enthronement”—are ones to which we will return at the end.

The decades since Käsemann wrote have seen a burgeoning in scholarship on Second Temple Judaism and intertestamental literature, seeing in the period prior to the establishment of rabbinic Judaism many rich and varied seams. However, while new vistas have opened out for modern scholarship, the term “apocalyptic” has also become rather contentious. As NT Wright notes, in his survey of Pauline scholarship over the past century, the term “apocalyptic” is “slippery and polymorphous” and “has become the watchword for a whole new family of interpretations,” primarily those of Paul but also as something of a catchphrase denoting a particular style of theology.²⁶ While the term “apocalyptic” had been used in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to denote not only certain well-known Jewish texts but also the ideology that was supposed to be enshrined within these texts, this was, Wright claims, an “easy-going categorization” that enabled scholars “to distinguish the bits of ancient Jewish tradition of which they approve (and which they supposed to have been carried forward into the teachings of Jesus and his early followers) from the bits of which they disapproved.”²⁷ Apocalyptic writings definitely fell into the latter category, considered as vulgar and marginal tendencies within Judaism, the Judaism, that is, as it was known from later times yet which was used as the background for understanding Christ and the Gospels, with the Apocalypse of John considered as being a relic of this vulgar Judaism. However, from this common practice, two different

²² Käsemann, “Beginnings,” 101–2.

²³ Ibid. 105.

²⁴ Ibid. 107.

²⁵ As NT Wright records, in a letter to Wright, dated 19 January 1983, Ernst Käsemann wrote: “Apokalyptik ist bei mir stets als Naherwartung verstanden (‘for me, apocalyptic always means imminent expectation’).” *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 286, fn. 19.

²⁶ NT Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 135.

²⁷ Ibid. 140.

movements developed: first, the study of the “apocalyptic” texts themselves, set within the broader history of Second Temple Judaism, and, second, “the theological use of the word ‘apocalyptic’ to denote a particular kind of ideology,” whose advocates, especially J. Louis Martyn and his followers, had not noticed that their use of this word “had lost its historical anchorage” becoming immersed instead in “the familiar neo-Orthodox polemic of ‘revelation’ against ‘religion.’”²⁸

Although there are issues in Wright’s own account that we would want to address, for now we would concur with him that the term “has become so slippery, capable of so many twists and turns of meaning, that it would be safest to confine it simply to a literary genre: that of ‘revelation,’ which is after all what the word basically means.”²⁹ If we do not use the word in a manner that is actually grounded in the particular religio-historical context about which we are speaking, we will certainly lose our moorings in reality, theological as well as historical. There has in fact been a great deal of reflection on the nature of the genre of “apocalypse” over the past couple of decades. The Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project concluded their work by defining the genre of “apocalypse” in this way:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.³⁰

This definition of the genre of apocalypse has been largely accepted, and, with a few refinements, “it fits the Fourth Gospel to a T,” as Ashton put it.³¹

The Gospel of John, as Benjamin Reynolds points out,³² is a narrative in which an otherworldly figure descends from heaven (1:1–18; 3:13, 34; 9:33; 17:3–5, etc) and mediates knowledge about heavenly things (3:12), especially regarding God and his Son (1:18), to a particular human being (19:35; 21:14) and to others (1:14; 2:11). The Son of Man bridges heaven and earth, thus opening the heavens to human beings (1.50–51). This revelation mediates personal eschatological salvation if it finds a response of faith (3:15–16; 14:6), and indeed offers a birth from above, from the Spirit (3:5–8), enabling believers to become children of God (3.12). John also blends together an emphasis on the present reality of judgment and salvation (3:17–18; 9:39; 12:31) with a recognition that the consummation of this still lies in the future (5:28–9; 6:39–40; 14:1–3). The Gospel of John in addition places the events unfolding in its narrative within a heavenly perspective (3:31–2; 6:25–40; 9:39; 13:33; 17:1–5; 20:17), an understanding of which is only available to his disciples after his glorification, when another heavenly figure is sent to remind them of all that he had said and done (12:16; 14:26; 16:12–15). Finally, although it is not specified in the definitions of the genre mentioned above, the Gospel of John has a particular interest in the textuality of this revelation and its own witness (12:16; 21:24–5).

Nevertheless, despite these structural and thematic commonalities, it remains the case that the Gospel of John, as Ashton acknowledges, “is obviously *not* an apocalypse.”³³ Instead, Ashton suggests that it is an apocalypse, “in reverse, upside down, inside out.” The reason that led

²⁸ Ibid. 140–1; 171–2

²⁹ Ibid. 140.

³⁰ J. J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards a Morphology of a Genre,” in idem, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14: Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–20, at 9.

³¹ Ashton, *Fourth Gospel*, 7.

³² Reynolds, “John and Jewish Apocalypses: Rethinking the Genre of John’s Gospel,” in Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland, *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 36–57, at 42.

³³ Ashton, *Fourth Gospel*, 309.

Ashton to this inversion is that: “There is no divine plan first disclosed to a seer in a vision and then repeated in earthly terms. The divine plan itself—the Logos—is incarnate: fully embodied in the person of Jesus. It is his life that reveals God’s grand design of saving the world, a design now being realized, lived out by the community.”³⁴ However, this is not quite sufficient, for there are apocalypses, such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, in which there are no heavenly ascents or visions of God, but which are instead played out fully upon the earth.³⁵ Reynolds also points out other reasons for concluding that in fact the Gospel of John cannot be counted as an apocalypse, such as the fact that the mediating figure in the Gospel of John is not, as it usually is in apocalypses, an angel, but the Jesus himself, Word of God, who is one with God, and who is crucified, buried, and raised to life something that never happens to the mediators of Jewish apocalypses.³⁶ As such, Reynolds rightly concludes, the Gospel of John “bursts the wineskins of the genre of ‘apocalypse.’”³⁷

Reynolds suggests instead that the best designation for the Gospel of John is an “apocalyptic Gospel.” Here the word “apocalyptic” is not an appeal to a theological or ideological presupposition or tendency, but is rather used to indicate the alignment of the Gospel with the literary genre and the content of apocalypses: it is an adjective qualifying the noun “Gospel,” which the Gospel of John unambiguously is. Although the Gospel of John is clearly different from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they do all, of course, narrate the life and deeds of Jesus and proclaim the good news about him. However one might determine the nature of the genre of Gospel and its origin, it is clear that they do resemble Greco-Roman biography, but also include, and indeed emphasize, the proclamation of the good news, something that is generally absent from Greco-Roman biographies; they are, in this sense, as Hengel calls them “*kerygmatic* biography.”³⁸ In the case of John, however, it is not simply a “*kerygmatic* biography,” but an “apocalyptic Gospel”: it is a Gospel, in that it is a narrative that proclaims the salvation offered through Christ; but it is apocalyptic, in that it utilizes structural and thematic elements shared with material found in the genre of apocalypse. In bringing these together, in a novel manner, it breaks both moulds: “John’s Gospel is not so much an apocalypse reversed, inside out, upside down, but an apocalypse that is shaken, stirred, and inserted into a Gospel.”³⁹

Describing the Gospel of John as an “apocalyptic Gospel” begs for further reflection upon the relationship between the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse also in his name. Despite almost universal modern skepticism about the common authorship of the Gospel and the Apocalypse, as mentioned earlier these two works were almost universally held to be by the same author during the course of the second century, especially by those who claimed a direct lineage, with only one intervening generation, to John.

In considering the question of identifying, and using, the genre apocalypse, two further points about need to be made. The first is that the use of the term “apocalypse” for designating a particular genre is in fact made on the basis of *this* work, the Apocalypse of John, specifically the opening words (Rev. 1.1), the first word of which—“apocalypse”—was very soon used as the

³⁴ Ashton, *Fourth Gospel*, 328. Ashton qualifies his claim in *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 114–18.

³⁵ Cf. Reynolds, “John and Jewish Apocalypses,” 43–52.

³⁶ Ibid. 43–500.

³⁷ Ibid. 49.

³⁸ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 157; and, summarizing this book, “The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ,” in C. Horton, ed., *The Earliest Gospels: The Origins and Transmission of the Earliest Christian Gospels* (London, 2004), 13–26, at 22.

³⁹ Reynolds, “John and Jewish Apocalypses,” 56.

title of the work itself.⁴⁰ In this, it is distinct from all earlier and contemporary works usually classified in this genre, such as *1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, or *2 Baruch*, though “apocalypse” does occur in the opening words, and is used thereafter as a title, for later works, such as *The Apocalypse of Abraham* and *The Apocalypse of Adam*. The second point is that the Apocalypse of John is absolutely unique in that it alone is written in the name of a contemporary and living author, rather than a figure from Israel’s distant past. These two points should remind us that, while useful and in fact necessary for serious discussion, definitions of literary genres are our own constructs. The Apocalypse of John, the “title” of which is now used to designate a genre, does not fit into the pseudepigraphical character of all the other works in that genre. Even if in writing the Apocalypse John was inspired, as Ashton suggests, by *1 Enoch*, he was not consciously writing a work within the genre of apocalypse as writers of *The Apocalypse of Abraham* and *The Apocalypse of Adam* might be said to have done. Employing a word which was distinctly and uniquely used by a particular author for his text, in his name, to designate a genre including other works not so called, and then using the, at least partial, affinity of the Gospel of John to this genre, as illuminating as it is for understanding the Gospel of John, risks obscuring the relation between the Gospel and the Apocalypse claiming to have been written by the same author.

Skepticism about the common authorship of the Gospel and Apocalypse is usually based on the point first made by Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century, that the two works apparently differ in vocabulary and style of the two works. Dionysius, however, also raised another point that is pertinent to our present discussion. He notes how some have rejected the Apocalypse, “declaring it to be unintelligible and illogical, and its title [τὴν ἐπίγραφὴν] false. For they say that it is not John’s, nor yet an apocalypse since it is veiled [κεκαλυμμένην] by its great and thick curtain [παραπετάσματι] of unintelligibility” (*h.e.* 7.25.2). Dionysius is here playing on the most basic meaning of the term “apocalypse,” one which must ultimately take priority over any definition of genre, that is, an apocalypse is an “unveiling.” Yet, if it is an “unveiling,” as is declared by its opening word, why does everything seems so obscure, as if veiled by an impenetrable curtain? If we take it at its word, however, could it be that, as an “apocalyptic Gospel,” where the adjective “apocalyptic” designates the Gospel’s use of the various trappings of works included in our genre of apocalypse, the Gospel of John in fact is the work which “veils” what is unveiled in the Apocalypse, veiling the ultimate victory of God in Christ in the narrative of Jesus and his apparent defeat, even if that “veiling” is done with an apocalyptic cast?

Speaking of the narrative quality of a Gospel as a “veil” of the gospel is, in a sense, no different than pointing out that the gospel proclaimed by Paul is, historically speaking, only subsequently given narrative form in the Gospels.⁴¹ The hermeneutic movement from the Apocalypse to the Gospel would also be given historical grounding if one were to accept Lightfoot and Rowland’s suggestion that the Apocalypse should be dated, not, as is usually done, in the last decade of the first century, but around A.D. 68.⁴² Moreover, when Paul proclaims the gospel he does so in fact in terms of an apocalypse, the unveiling of an eternal mystery. This is most clear in the concluding verses to the Letter to the Romans:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the apocalypse of the mystery [κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου] which was kept secret for long ages but is now made manifest and made known through

⁴⁰ Irenaeus is the first to use the word “apocalypse” as the title of the work (*Haer.* 5.30.3); it appears as a title in the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Ephraemi.

⁴¹ On this, see Will Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), study 3, “The Evangelion,” 117–51.

⁴² Lightfoot, *Essays*, 132–3; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 404.

the prophetic writings, according to the command of the eternal God, to all the nations, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore. (Rom. 16:25–7)

The gospel, the preaching of Jesus Christ, is “the apocalypse of the mystery”; and this is made known through the prophetic writings. A great deal of excellent scholarly work has been carried out over the past decades regarding the use of Scripture in the Gospels and the interpretation of Scripture in early Christianity. In this a more sophisticated and adequate understanding has been advanced of the various reading strategies or moves deployed, such as allegory, typology, anagogy, and so on.⁴³ But at the most fundamental level, however, these are all variations within what can be called an “apocalyptic” reading: both Jesus of Nazareth, whom the disciples thought they knew, and the Scriptures, which they thought they had read with understanding, turn out to be other than what they had thought, when the veil is lifted and the glory of Christ shines in Scripture through the Cross, so revealing his true and eternal identity (2 Cor 3:12–4:6). As Gregory of Nyssa put it: “One may wish to refer to the anagogical interpretation of such sayings as ‘tropology’ or ‘allegory’ or by some other name. We shall not quarrel about the name so long as a firm grasp is kept on thoughts that edify.”⁴⁴ It is not a matter of defining the right ‘method’ or ‘strategy’ for reading scripture, but that it is read within an apocalyptic framework pivoted upon the cross, such that it is always a proclamation of *the* gospel, that which “edifies.”

With this proclamation of the gospel, ‘the apocalypse of the mystery’ and the Scriptures now unveiled, it is in terms of the Scriptures that the evangelists depicted Christ in their Gospels. Irenaeus describes the Scriptures as a thesaurus, a treasury of precious stones, the images and words from the Scriptures, which form a mosaic depicting Christ the King, which his opponents have rearranged to form the image of a dog or fox (*haer.* 1.8.1). In recent times, Joel Marcus, drawing from E. Gässer, has used a similar analogy, that of a “paint-box” used by the evangelists in their depiction of Christ.⁴⁵ Richard Hays, also, concludes that “Scripture becomes—in Paul’s reading—a metaphor, a vast trope that signifies and illuminates the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ Because God has acted in Christ in a definitive, and unexpected, manner, making everything new, Scripture itself must be read anew. The “word of the cross,” the preaching of “Christ crucified” may be a scandal for the Jews and folly for the Gentiles, but it alone is the “power of God” making known “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18–25). This preaching, the *kerygma*, provides what Hays describes as “the eschatological *apokalypsis* of the cross,” a hermeneutical lens, through which Scripture can now be refracted with “a profound new symbolic coherence.”⁴⁷ In their Gospels, then, the evangelists proclaimed Christ by drawing upon the language of the Scriptures, investing or clothing him with these words, as the flesh by which he is made known, seen, and understood. However, these narratives are thus also a veil, which, while essential for communicating the gospel, must also be “unveiled” for the gospel to be received as a proclamation rather than merely a report about past events.

Finally, it is exactly with this hermeneutical move that we pass from the Synoptic Gospels to that of John. For whereas in the Synoptics the disciples are not presented as understanding Christ on the basis of Scripture until after the Passion (the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 being the classic text), the Gospel of John begins its narrative at this very point: the Baptist identifies him as “the

⁴³ The literature for this is vast; a good starting place is Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Songs*, Pref. (ed. Norris, 2–5).

⁴⁵ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 1992), 2.

⁴⁶ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 149.

⁴⁷ Hays, *Echoes*, 169.

Lamb of God” (1:29; Isa 53:7; Jer 11:19), and Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45). Yet, although it is by reference to the Scriptures that Philip identifies Jesus, that he still identifies him as “the son of Joseph” indicates that he has not yet fully grasped his true identity. After a brief conversation with Jesus, Nathanael then address him, alluding to title of the crucified one: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (1:49). Yet even this is not enough: ““You shall see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’” (1:50–51).

John’s depiction of Christ thereafter is indeed very different than the earlier Gospels. There is no event of transfiguration, for instance, for on every page we see the transfigured Lord: the one from above (3:31; 8:23); the one who is not put to death but rather lays down his life, of his own accord (10:15–18), at the right time (2:4); the one who does not pray that the cup should pass yet reconciles himself the Father’s will (Matt. 23:39; Mark 14:46 ; Luke 22:42), but rather asserts: “What shall I say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose I have come to this hour’ (12:27). While we hear in the other gospels that at the crucifixion the curtain of the temple was rent in two (Matt 27:50; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), this is not mentioned in the Gospel of John, for at this point (even if as a narrative the gospel is still veiled) we hear crucified one, not crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34;), but, rather, affirming with stately majesty: “It is finished,” or rather, “it is completed” or “it is perfected” (John 19:30), and then “handing over the Spirit” to “the mother” and the disciple who stands unashamed at the foot of the cross, who in turn puts on Christ’s own identity: “behold your son” (19:26). What it is that is finished or completed at this point are all apocalyptic themes: judgment (12:31: “now is the judgment of this world”), the temple (2:21: “he spoke of the temple of his body”) and the true living human being or Son of Man (19:5: “Behold the human being”), the project of God begun in the beginning (cf. Gen. 1:26).

We can now finally return to the rhetorical questions posed by Käsemann, to the effect that we should not think of ourselves as in possession of a *theologia perennis*, not even the supposed central pillars of Christian theology—Trinity and Incarnation—but rather understand that the continuity of theology consists in the preservation of certain themes in the proclamation, especially “the hope of the manifestation of the Son of God on his way to enthronement,” and that it is this theme “which sprang from the Easter experience and determined the Easter faith” that ensures the survival of Christian theology, and, in fact, is (rather than the “apocalyptic” as he takes that term) “the mother of all Christian theology.” As such, given that the celebration of Pascha originated exclusively in Johannine circles, looking back to John as the high priest of the paschal sacrifice, the most appropriate description of this Gospel is not “an apocalyptic Gospel,” although it is that in the sense sketched out, but “The Paschal Gospel.”